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The Oxyrhynchus Sayings of Jesus in Relation to the Gospel-making Movement of the First and Second Centuries¹

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THROUGH the skilful labors of Drs. Grenfell and Hunt, excavators for the Egypt Exploration Fund, we have recently come into possession of three short portions of extra-canonical second-century gospels.² The first portion, consisting of eight Sayings of Jesus, was found in 1897; the second portion, consisting of an introduction and five Sayings of Jesus, was found in 1903; and the third portion, consisting of several Sayings on different bits of papyrus, was also found in 1903. We may designate the three portions as the first, second, and third series, respectively.³ All three portions were unearthed at Oxyrhynchus, one of the chief centres of early Christianity in Egypt, one hundred and twenty miles south of Cairo. The fragments of papyrus upon which these sayings are preserved were discovered in conjunction with a very large collection of Greek papyri dating from the first to the seventh century of our era.

The first series of Sayings is written upon a leaf of a papyrus book. The verso of the leaf is numbered 11, showing

¹ Read at the International Congress of Arts and Sciences, St. Louis, Mo., September, 1904.

² Reproduced in facsimile, with conjectural restorations and discussion, in Grenfell and Hunt, *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Parts I (1897) and IV (1903); also in a popular edition, *New Sayings of Jesus, and Fragment of a Lost Gospel*, New York, 1904.

³ This notation, based on the chronological order of the discovery of the Sayings, is preferable to that adopted by Drs. Grenfell and Hunt in the *editio princeps* of the Sayings found in 1903, where those found in 1897 are called the *second* series.

that the Sayings belonged to a collection from which this leaf has become separated. The leaf is written on both sides, three Sayings on the verso, one Saying divided between the two sides,⁴ and four on the recto. The text is in an excellent state of preservation, so that little conjecture was necessary to restore it, except in the case of the fourth Saying, which is almost entirely illegible. The second series is written upon a fragment of papyrus which has been severed from some portion of a papyrus roll. The writing is in a single column on the back of the paper, the face of the paper containing a portion of a surveyor's record. The fragment containing these Sayings is torn or broken along the middle of the text-column, so that the right-hand half of the lines is entirely gone. The text of the left half of the column is in good preservation except at the bottom, where much of the fifth Saying is destroyed at the beginning as well as at the end of the lines. The third series is contained in eight fragments of a papyrus roll; only three of the fragments contain enough text to make restoration possible.

The palæographical data of these manuscript fragments show that they were written about the middle of the third century A.D. The letters are of the good, medium-sized uncial form belonging to the third century; the character of the writing shows that the manuscripts were carefully and expensively prepared for general use.

The Oxyrhynchus Sayings are in part parallel to the sayings of Jesus preserved in the canonical gospels, somewhat more than one-half of the new material duplicating what is contained there, but in form these passages exhibit considerable differences from the canonical accounts and not a small degree of independence. The parallels cover sayings in all four of the canonical gospels, indicating that such material as the latter contain was in general circulation at the time the Oxyrhynchus documents arose, but also that there was no fixed and exclusive form of these memorabilia of Jesus.

⁴ If Grenfell and Hunt's division of the verses is correct. This, however, is very uncertain; many scholars prefer to treat their "fourth" Saying as a portion of the third, making but seven Sayings in the first series.

There are also in the three series some very important Sayings which the canonical gospels do not contain. Several of these have parallels in extra-canonical gospel sayings quoted by the Church Fathers of the second and third centuries; a few have no parallels in any Christian literature. The interpretation of these rarer Sayings is perplexing. A thorough discussion by many scholars has already been given to the Sayings of the first series, which have been under consideration for seven years.⁵ Those of the second and third series have only recently been made public,⁶ and have still to receive thorough discussion.⁷ The chief problems of their interpretation, however, have been studied in connection with the first series. A consensus of opinion has been reached that the Sayings of 1897 do not show any doctrinal bias in the interest of or in opposition to any of the great controversies of the second and third Christian centuries. This means that they were traditional rather than manufactured for particular purposes. There is no sufficient ground for denying them a first-century origin. The same is true of the Sayings of 1903.

⁵ See especially Grenfell and Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Part I, and ΛΟΓΙΑ ΙΗΣΟΥ: *Sayings of our Lord*, London, 1897; Lock and Sanday, *Two Lectures on the "Sayings of Jesus,"* Oxford, 1897; Swete, "The Oxyrhynchus Fragment," in *Expository Times*, September, 1897; Harnack, *Ueber die jüngst entdeckten Sprüche Jesu*, translated in *Expositor*, November and December, 1897; Zahn, "Die jüngst gefundenen Aussprüche Jesu," in *Theol. Literaturblatt*, September 3 and 10, 1897; M. R. James, "The New Sayings of Christ," and J. Rendel Harris, "The Logia and the Gospels," in *Contemporary Review*, August, September, 1897; Batiffol, "Les Logia du Papyrus de Behnesa," in *Revue Biblique*, October, 1897; E. A. Abbott, "The Logia of Behnesa," in *American Journal of Theology*, January, 1898.

⁶ The first publication of the Sayings discovered in 1903 was delayed until June, 1904.

⁷ See the two editions by Grenfell and Hunt (titles in footnote² above); article, "New Sayings of Jesus," in *Church Quarterly Review*, July, 1904; Swete, "The New Oxyrhynchus Sayings," in *Expository Times*, August, 1904; Batiffol, "Nouveaux fragments évangéliques de Behnesa," in *Revue Biblique*, 1904; Hilgenfeld, "Neue Logia Jesu," in *Zeitschrift f. wiss. Theologie*, 1904; V. Bartlet, "The Oxyrhynchus Sayings of Jesus," in *Contemporary Review*, January, 1905; Heinrici, "Die neuen Herrensprüche," in *Theol. Studien und Kritiken*, January, 1905; Lake, "The New Sayings of Jesus and the Synoptic Problem," in *Hibbert Journal*, January, 1905.

But are they to be attributed to Jesus himself? With regard to the major portion of the Sayings in the three series there is certainly no reason for questioning their substantial authenticity, since they are also found in the canonical gospels and in both places bear the marks of genuineness. It is only with regard to the minor portion of the Sayings, those which have no canonical parallels, that the question is problematic, and these must be considered individually, each upon its own merits.⁸ Some have support in the extra-canonical Christian literature, others do not. Some have more evident marks of authenticity than others.

The external evidence for these Sayings, which cannot alone establish their authenticity, is rather favorable than adverse; but the final decision rests with their intrinsic probability. Here different interpreters have taken and will take different views. A Saying which seems to one interpreter to be in accordance with the point of view, the spirit, the teaching, and the manner of Jesus, may seem to another interpreter out of character, so diverse are the present conceptions of Jesus. Further, the meaning of the Sayings is not in all cases certain; some understand them in a sense germane to Jesus, others in a sense which it would be difficult to attrib-

⁸ The Saying which has been most variously interpreted is that in I. 5, "Jesus saith, Wherever there are (two), they are not without God, and wherever there is one alone, I say, I am with him. Raise the stone and there thou shalt find me; cleave the wood and there am I" (restoration and translation of Drs. Grenfell and Hunt). The first portion of the Saying has a general parallel in Matt. 18²⁰, and should furnish the clue to the interpretation of the second portion. The thought then will be of the constant presence of Christ everywhere with his disciples, even in their daily toil (so Harnack, Lock, and Sanday). It is scarcely to be understood as an anticipation of the theory of the immanence of God in nature, or as an evidence of animistic conceptions. Swete takes the language allegorically, "Christ is with the disciple who is a builder of Christianity." Barnes also interprets allegorically, making the "stone" refer to the sepulchre, and the "wood" to the cross, of Jesus. James interprets, "You must make an effort if you wish to find me." E. A. Abbott and Schmiedel make the "raising of stones" refer to children of Abraham, and "cleaving the wood" to cutting down the barren tree of Pharisaic conventional law (cf. Matt. 3¹⁰ Jer. 18-10). Bacon thinks of the ritual of sacrifice, "Prepare an altar, pile up the stone, cleave the wood for fire, and I shall be there in your worship."

ute to him. While, therefore, we cannot expect a complete agreement of scholars, there is good reason to predicate substantial authenticity of all the Oxyrhynchus Sayings.

Of course we find here, as we find abundantly in the canonical gospels, that the primary interest of the first-century Christians was not to preserve the exact form of Jesus' utterances — they were primarily concerned with preserving his ideas, his teachings. They felt themselves free to translate his Aramaic utterances into Greek, and to make such modifications of form and adaptations of meaning as seemed to them most helpful in their practical work. The canonical gospels, in their parallel accounts of Jesus' Sayings, exhibit variations of form which the tradition assumed. We are therefore prepared to find that still other forms of similar utterances appear in these recently discovered Sayings.⁹ But that does not militate against their substantial authenticity. It is probably true that the Oxyrhynchus Sayings for which there are no parallels have likewise departed, little or much, from the exact form which Jesus gave them; and it may be that the exact turn of thought or shade of meaning which belonged to the original utterances has not always been perfectly preserved. Still, such departure is not to be alleged so long as it is possible to harmonize these newly found teachings with the Jesus whom we know.

The conclusion from these considerations is that we have in the Oxyrhynchus Sayings portions of one, two, or three second-century gospels. The Sayings obviously belonged to collections¹⁰ of gospel material of considerable extent. The first series occupied leaf 11 of a book; the second series was

⁹ Compare, for example, Matt. 13⁵⁷, ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· οὐκ ἔστιν προφήτης ἄτιμος εἰ μὴ ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ πατρίδι καὶ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ; Mk. 6⁴, καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν προφήτης ἄτιμος εἰ μὴ ἐν τῇ πατρίδι ἐαυτοῦ καὶ ἐν τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ; Lk. 4²⁴, εἶπεν δέ· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐδεὶς προφήτης δεκτός ἐστιν ἐν τῇ πατρίδι ἐαυτοῦ; *Oxyr. Sayings*, I. 6, λέγει Ἰησοῦς, οὐκ ἔστιν δεκτός προφήτης ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ, οὐδὲ ἰατρὸς ποιεῖ θεραπείας εἰς τοὺς γινώσκοντας αὐτόν. Similarly, Matt. 10²⁶ = Mk. 4²² = Lk. 8¹⁷ 12¹² = *Oxyr. Sayings*, II. 4.

¹⁰ The term will be used in the plural for convenience, without expressing a fixed judgment as to whether our three series indicate one, two, or three collections.

upon a fragment of a papyrus roll which had been previously used to contain the records of an official land-survey list, and such lists (according to Drs. Grenfell and Hunt) "tend to be of very great length." The nature of the Sayings shows that these particular collections were made early in the first half of the second century. There is a general agreement that they were in existence as early as 140 A.D., and they may have been composed as early as 100 A.D. It is very likely that they were made in Egypt by some of the Christians there, very probably by Jewish Christians, for it was a Jewish idea and custom to construct florilegia of great teachers. The *Pirke Aboth*, or "Sayings of the Jewish Fathers," is the classical example, containing series of choice sayings of the great rabbis, each saying or group of sayings preceded by the name of its author — "Hillel said," "Shammai said," etc. The collections were really gospels; not mere extracts made for private use, but a body of material used for the same general purpose as the canonical gospels. In extent and literary characteristics, however, they may have differed considerably from the latter.

These 'gospels,' the existence of which is indicated by the Oxyrhynchus Sayings, seem to have arisen without direct relation to the canonical gospels. The form and content of the Sayings show their independence. The authors of these collections probably knew of the canonical gospels, perhaps used them and valued them highly; but they did not feel excluded from gospel-making on their own part, nor did they feel bound, in producing gospels of their own composition, to copy or imitate closely the existing works. These collections, therefore, do not bear testimony to the individual canonical gospels, but merely prove the existence of other gospel material such as these books contain.

Nor do the Oxyrhynchus Sayings appear to have been drawn directly from extra-canonical second-century gospels of which we have any knowledge. Harnack's elaborate arguments to prove that some of the Sayings in the first series were taken directly from the Gospel according to the Egyptians, and the arguments of others in behalf of the

Gospel according to the Hebrews as a source, have failed to carry general conviction. The consensus of opinion is that the Sayings are independent of all other known gospels, even where parallelisms exist. Similarly, those Sayings which have parallels in the patristic literature give evidence of being from independent tradition, and nearer to the original form. In other words, the gospels to which these Oxyrhynchus Sayings belonged were collections of the memorabilia of Jesus, which arose out of the gospel-making movement of the first and second centuries, and were parallel with its other products. They gathered up material from the great stream of transmission of the gospel-story which flowed through the first century and into the first half of the second century.

Whether all three series of the Sayings belonged to different portions of a single collection, so that they represent but one gospel, or whether each series belonged to a distinct gospel, cannot be decided. Acting upon the principle that the hypothesis should not exceed the requirement of the evidence, it might be held that all three series come from a single collection. But the handwriting of the papyrus-fragments which contain the three series shows that they belonged to three different manuscripts, and the third series is not homogeneous in character with the other two. The first two series could easily have belonged to the same collection, and that they did so belong is the general opinion thus far. The third series, however, seems to indicate a collection more in the style of the canonical gospels, without the constant presence of the formula, "Jesus says," and with more of the discourse method of arranging the teachings.

The evidence is entirely against the crude view (sometimes held) that when the second century opened the four canonical gospels held the field exclusively, as though the gospel-making movement of the first century stopped abruptly at 100 A.D. This was certainly not the case. The canonical gospels, at least the first three, entered the second century with great prominence and prestige; they were the finest and most used products of the gospel-making process

in the first century. But there was still to be a long period through which many other gospels were to compete with them for popular favor. The Gospel according to the Hebrews and the Gospel according to the Egyptians arose not later than the first half of the second century, and were keen rivals of the canonical gospels during the second and third centuries. Late in the second century, some fifty years after the rise of the two extra-canonical gospels just named, the Diatessaron of Tatian came into wide use and high esteem. The canonical gospels, to be sure, in time established themselves as the all-sufficient records of Christ. But the extinction of other gospels was not accomplished for centuries.

In the beginning of the second century, when those gospels arose to which the Oxyrhynchus Sayings belong, the gospel-making movement was still going on. In spite of the fact that the first century had created four preëminent gospels, certain Christians still undertook to make other compilations of the memorabilia of Jesus — not a strange occurrence, for there are always those who prefer to make their own books rather than use the books of others, even though their own are inferior. Besides, these new collections were of a different character from the canonical gospels. Instead of weaving together the sayings and the deeds of Jesus, as had been done in the four New Testament books, the gospels indicated by the Oxyrhynchus Sayings were collections of the *Sayings* of Jesus almost exclusively. Also, in the gospel or gospels of which the first and second series were a part, Jesus' utterances were grouped together apparently without much relation to one another, and each was introduced by the formula, "Jesus says." The introductory verse of the second series of Sayings indicates that the collection was in a literary way connected with the name of Thomas and possibly of other apostles; or perhaps, as Professor Swete thinks,¹¹ different divisions of the same book were headed by the names of different apostles.

It is interesting to note that a collection of the Sayings

¹¹ See his article in the *Expository Times*, August, 1904.

of Jesus apart from the events of his life was thus again thought desirable early in the second century. For it was just this kind of a collection of gospel memorabilia which Papias, soon after 100 A.D., reports the apostle Matthew to have made in the middle of the first century. The Logia of which he speaks were in all probability a collection of the Sayings of Jesus; there may have been some narrative material connected with them, but in subordinate relation. The evidence of the synoptic gospels does not permit us to think that these Logia of Matthew were introduced each by the formula "Jesus says"; probably Jesus' utterances were arranged more in the form of discourses, as in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. What we note is, that the first known attempt to make a considerable collection of the gospel memorabilia was to set forth the sayings of Jesus. We need not therefore be surprised to find the undertaking repeated early in the second century, after the Matthæan Logia had been superseded by the completer kind of gospel.

It is possible that the collections of Jesus' Sayings indicated by the Oxyrhynchus fragments were actually composed in the first century, and indeed before the canonical gospels were made. It is possible that they belonged to that large group of proto-gospels which Luke mentions (Lk. 1¹), and that they continued to exist from the decade 50-60 A.D. down through the subsequent years of the century when the canonical gospels arose. They would then have striven through a long period for general recognition and use, but would have succeeded in keeping the patronage of only a comparatively small branch of the Christian world.

A more likely hypothesis, however, is that these collections were made in the early second century. They may have taken up some nuclei of proto-gospels or groups of sayings already collected, as was done by the authors of the canonical gospels. But they gathered up their material, not primarily or directly from the canonical gospels, but from the living tradition, oral and written, which was still abundant, as Papias testifies. This tradition was directly descended from the gospel story which the apostles and the first gen-

eration of Christians had put into circulation. Of course, through the vicissitudes of the years, it had undergone well-known variations of arrangement, content, and form, so that, speaking generally, the gospel tradition at the beginning of the second century, because of the lapse of time, followed the original utterances of Jesus less closely than that which had been taken up at an earlier stage into the synoptic gospels. But the characteristics of the Oxyrhynchus Sayings are such as to indicate their direct line of connection with the authentic sayings of Jesus.¹²

The gospel-making movement in the first Christian centuries was more extensive and more complex than is commonly thought. The disciples—even during the public ministry of Jesus, and much more after that ministry had closed—remembered, repeated, taught, and circulated the sayings of Jesus and the events of his life. During the twenty years after the public ministry, the first Christians everywhere used the memorabilia of Jesus as the source of their Christian faith and practice, as the staple element of their instruction, and as the charter of their movement. It resulted that in all the churches the gospel memorabilia were known, valued, and used, and that in the larger, central churches of the first century they were gathered up into considerable collections.

Also, when the gospel was carried out into the gentile world

¹² The view expressed in this paragraph, written in September, 1904, has received independent support in the article by Professor Lake (*Hibbert Journal*, January, 1905), who says: "A collection of sayings similar to the Oxyrhynchus papyri was in existence earlier than our First and Third Gospels, and probably contemporaneously with the Second. . . . It is more probable that the earliest generation of Christians were more anxious 'to remember the words of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 20³⁵) than to picture his doings among the Jews and the facts of his ministry. So far as Jewish circles were concerned, this seems to me almost to be proved by the analogy of the Pirqe 'Abhōth. . . . There we have direct evidence that the Jews were interested in the teaching of the Fathers, but scarcely cared at all for the details of their lives. It seems to me that the new Sayings afford considerable indirect support to the view that behind our Gospels lie two kinds of record, one based on the Jewish plan, which gave Sayings without a complete historical framework, and the other probably due to the desire for more historical information, which certainly must have arisen very soon especially in gentile circles" (pp. 340 f.).

(40-60 A.D.) and came to those who were unacquainted with the Aramaic language, the gospel story was translated into Greek piece by piece, here and there, by various individuals. And the exclusive oral tradition which had preserved the memorabilia of Jesus during the first fifteen or twenty years, was supplemented (not superseded) by written transmission, according to the custom of the gentile world. With this translation into Greek and the writing down of the gospel memorabilia for wide circulation and use in the Roman Empire, came the more advanced stages of gospel-making. The Logia of Matthew, about 50 A.D., was the first formal product of which we have record. It was followed within fifteen years by the Gospel of Mark, and that within another fifteen years by the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of John arose at the end of the first century or early in the second century.

The gospel-making process was a movement, not the exclusive endeavor of a few individuals. To this fact Luke bears conclusive testimony (Lk. 1¹). Many proto-gospels were produced in this active period of gospel-making, but none of them have come down to us in the form in which Luke knew and spoke of them. The Logia of Matthew was largely taken up into the first and third canonical gospels, and disappeared entirely in its Aramaic, or even in its individual Greek form. A similar fate befell the other proto-gospels. They were either absorbed into the canonical gospels, or failed to perpetuate themselves because of their evident inferiority in arrangement, content, or form to the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

But these proto-gospels, inferior as they were, were not at once abandoned. They continued in vogue in certain places and among certain Christians who had compiled them or appreciated them. It is reasonable to think that some of them were in circulation even in the second century. In addition, the gospel-making process continued even after the canonical gospels had come into existence, for other Christians were still ready to try their hands at the collection of the memorabilia of Jesus, especially where this collection

could be made upon certain lines essentially different from those of the canonical gospels.

We recur, therefore, to the view that it was in the early second century that the gospels arose of which the Oxyrhynchus Sayings formed a part. These collections were in one sense an aftermath; but the authors took up in variant form from the living tradition many of the sayings of Jesus which had been gathered into the already existing gospels, so that the Sayings which have no parallels in the canonical gospels formed the smaller portion of these collections. Because these rare Sayings, which failed of preservation in the canonical gospels, are to us of greater interest than those which have canonical parallels, it does not follow that they were of greater interest than the others to the authors of the original works. The authors and the earliest readers probably counted of greatest value the Sayings for which the canonical gospels have parallels. It may well have been these, rather than the peculiar ones, which most gave the Oxyrhynchus collections vitality and circulation.

The question whether Jesus could have said this or that thing attributed to him in these fragments is one which second-century Christians would scarcely have raised, and could not well have answered. They understood fairly well, and profoundly revered, Jesus and his teaching. He was to them of supreme interest and importance. But they did not apply a rigid method of historical investigation to the oral and written tradition of his life.

The canonical gospels increasingly manifested their superiority over all other gospels, from the time of their composition until the latter part of the second century, when they became the only fully recognized evangelic narratives. They early surpassed in favor and use such collections as the Oxyrhynchus Sayings represent, for in the main they were nearer in form to the original utterances of Jesus, better in arrangement, and more complete in their contents. It was right that they should increase in favor and use, and that these other competing gospels should decrease.